

The Gag Rule

In the 1830s abolitionist groups, often organized by women, conducted massive petitioning drives calling for an end to slavery. Southern delegations and their northern supporters feared that any attention heightened regional tensions and promoted slave rebellions. On May 26, 1836, the House of Representatives adopted a “Gag Rule” stating that all petitions regarding slavery would be tabled without being read, referred, or printed.



Photograph of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, 1851

Courtesy of Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

Former President John Quincy Adams, who had returned to Congress, took up the petitioners' cause. Slowly support for Adams's campaign grew, and on December 3, 1844, the House abolished the rule. The vote was a major defeat to the supporters of slavery, who recognized that their power to maintain federal support was at risk.

Anti-Slavery Petitions

The enactment of the Gag Rule, rather than discouraging petitioners, energized the anti-slavery movement to flood the Capitol with written demands. Activists held up the suppression of debate as an example of the slaveholding South's infringement of the rights of all Americans.

To the Honorable the House of Representatives of the United States.

The undersigned ~~citizens~~ of ~~Brockton~~ in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, have learned with astonishment and alarm, that your honorable body did, on the 21st of December last, adopt a resolution in the words following, to wit:

~~Resolved, That all memorials, petitions, and papers, touching the abolition of slavery, or the buying, selling, or transfer of slaves in any State, territory, or district of the United States, shall be laid on the table, without reading, or presenting, and that no further action shall be had thereon.~~

Your memorialists consider this resolution a violation of the Constitution of the United States—of the right of the people of the United States to petition—and of the right of their Representatives to freedom of speech as members of your honorable body: They further regard it as an assumption of authority, at once dangerous and destructive to the fundamental principles of republican government, to the rights of minorities, to the sovereignty of the People, and TO THE UNION OF THESE UNITED STATES: They therefore present this their solemn and earnest remonstrance against said resolution, and respectfully ask your honorable body to IMMEDIATELY RESCIND IT.

Sarah M. Grimké

Angelina E. Grimké

Eliza Philbrick

Lizzy Bell

Sarah Celfe

Elizabeth Celfe

Abbe H. Whitney

Katherine Gerry

Reuben S. Gerry

Rebecca Jaguith

10

Anna A. Ogden

Miguel Tolman

Mary J. R. Tolman

Elizabeth Whyte

Laura S. Whyte

Ellen S. Whyte

Eliza Aspinwall

Samantha B. Huggins

Mehitable Stone

Mary H. Stone

20

Annie Correll Philbrick

Katherine Loper

Hannah Loper

Harriet Loper

Hannah Loper

TO THE HON. THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

The petition of the undersigned Ladies of the County of Erie, (N. Y.) humbly sheweth,—That your petitioners feel themselves bound by their duty to their country, to protest against every practical violation of the principles embodied in the memorable Declaration of our Independence, viz. "That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life LIBERTY and the pursuit of happiness." Your petitioners, deeply sympathizing with their sisters in bondage, cannot regard themselves as having done their duty to their country—to suffering humanity, and to God, till they have protested against the continuance of SLAVERY and the SLAVE TRADE in the District of Columbia, and prayed your honorable bodies to exercise your constitutional powers for their immediate abolition.

Remembering that the traffic in human flesh, when practiced upon the ocean, has been solemnly declared piracy by our own, and that it is so considered by almost all christian nations, your petitioners earnestly implore that slavery the necessary cause of that traffic, may no longer be permitted to exist in the capital of this Republic.

NAMES.

Clarissa N. Preston
Caroline R. Plumb
Melissa B. Orris
Caroline M. Mather
Hannah Pichee
Adah Starkweather
Adelia S. Leary
Nancy Pichee
Sally Wood
Jennet Hill
Clarissa S. McMullan
Sally Branning
Abiah M. Grammes
Cornelia C. Munger
Hannah Putney
Eliza Smith
Mary C. Dickinson
Amelia Q. Dickinson
Harriet E. Hewitt
Sally Voburg
Mary L. Howard
Temperance Pearson
Rizpah Knight
Pamela Ransford
Cynthia Ransford

NAMES.

Lydia Hitchcock
Mary Parson
Fannella Bailey
Jane M. Mather
Berthenia Plumb
Sally Gardner
Mary W. Stearns
Abbie Fox
Harriet D. Home
Harriet Butler
Eliza B. B. Field
Phebe Henry
Ariette Lee
Mary Stan
Electa Pierce
Mary Ann Page
Roxaetun Camp
Pamela Southwick
Clarinda B. Southwick
Anna Southwick
Submit Tucker
Esther Howe
Sarah Ann J. Wilcox
Mary Johnson

Petition sent to Congress during the 1830s

Loan from National Archives and Records Administration

MEMORIAL

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled.

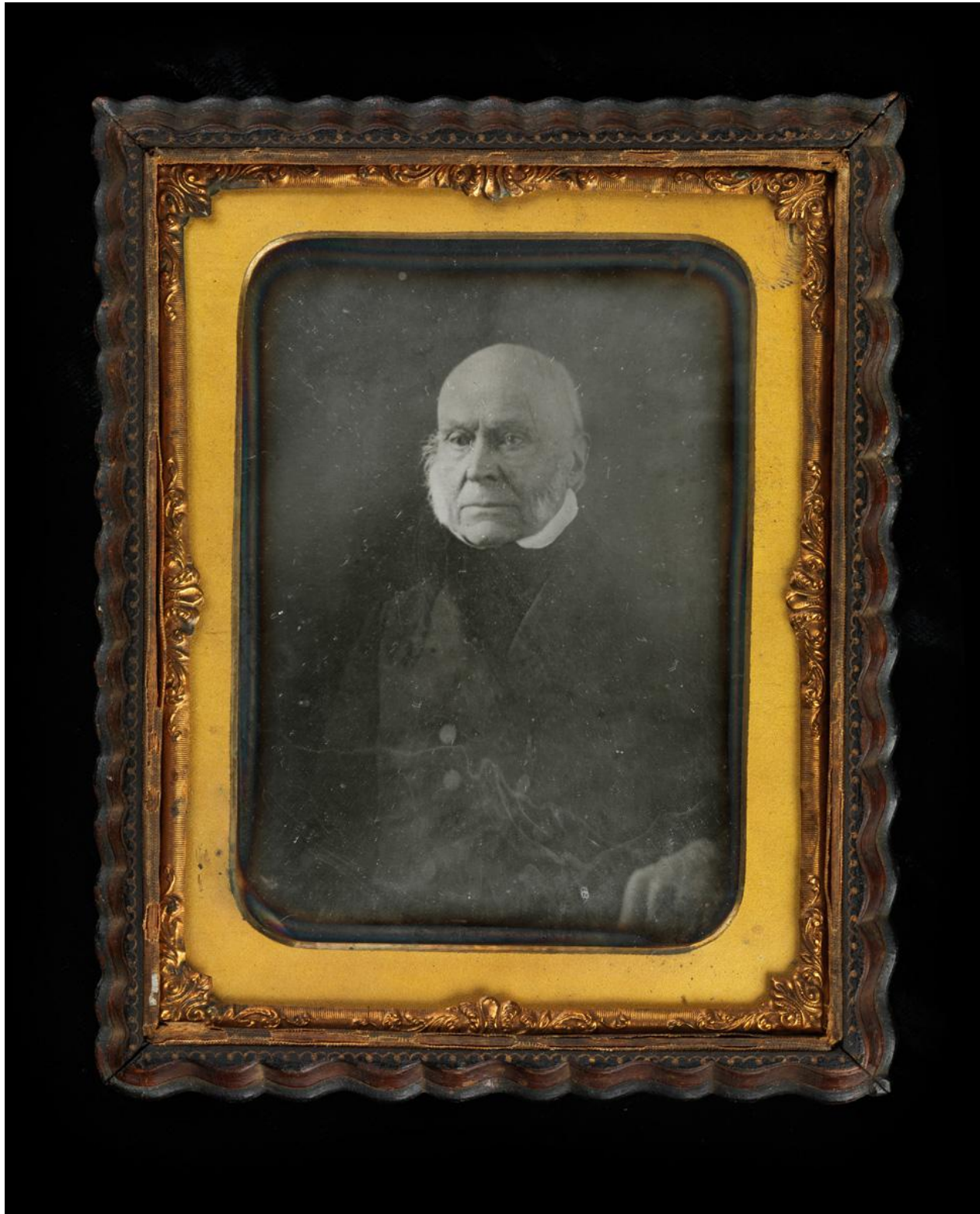
The Memorial of the undersigned Female citizens of Pennsylvania, and parts adjacent, represent, that slavery and its concomitant, the slave trade, are practices which no circumstance, or complication of circumstances, can justify; for they are entirely at variance with justice and humanity—that it involves in its nature the worst extremes of crime, and the greatest human misery—that it is a gross violation of the boasted Declaration of Independence, which boldly proclaims, as self evident truths, “that all men are created equal—that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuits of happiness. At the very seat of government human beings are born whom the laws pronounce to be, for the term of *life*, not equal to other citizens, and who are wholly deprived of the great boon of liberty, and the enjoyment of the powers of free agency. We therefore intreat you to take the subject into serious consideration, analyze its nature, investigate its consequences, bring it to the test of the broad and universally acknowledged principles of right and wrong, try it by the common standard of justice, by the spirit of the Constitution, and the laws of Christianity, and enact such law or laws as will immediately abolish slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and territories over which Congress has exclusive jurisdiction.

Susan Jackson
 Sarah M. Wilson
 Sarah Heald
 Sarah Wilson
 Sidney Cherry
 Brutah T. Wilson
 Catharine Richards
 Phoebe Veal
 Mary Sharpley
 Hannah Heald
 Abigail Phillips
 Orpah Smyth
 Ann Deo
 Sarah Kirk
 Abigail E. Wilson
 Ruthanna Chandler

Susan Dick
 Elizabeth Wilson
 Mary F. Swaine
 Martha Sharpley
 Caroline Phillips
 Orpah Heald
 Mary Ann Taylor
 Orpah Pafmore
 Louisa Leffler
 Hannah H. Dixon
 Mary Wilson
 Abigail Harland
 Louisa Webster
 Lydia Pusey
 Lydia Jackson
 Mary Walker

Right to Petition Cane

Julius Pratt and Company presented John Quincy Adams with this ivory cane made from a single elephant tusk in recognition of his leadership against the Gag Rule. The cane was decorated with a gold-inlaid eagle holding a petition. On the band below the knob is inscribed “justum et tenacem propositi virum” (a man just and firm of purpose). When the rule was defeated on December 3, 1844, the date was added to the eagle’s wings.



Daguerreotype of John Quincy Adams taken in the 1840s



Right to Petition cane

Bequeathed by John Quincy Adams and transferred from U.S. Patent Office

[View object record </collections/nmah_495898>](#)

Hours & Admission

Open every day, except December 25, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission is free and no tickets are required.

Location & Contact

1300 Constitution Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20560 <https://www.google.com/maps/place/smithsonian+national+museum+of+american+history/@38.8912835,-77.0322449,17z>

[Contact Information </about/contact>](#)

Our mission is to empower people to create a just and compassionate future by exploring, preserving, and sharing the complexity of our past.

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